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TRIBUTE TO
HAVEN EMERSON, M.D.*

CHAS. GORDON HEYD

To attempt an odyssey of the professional career of Haven Emerson would be quite beyond the present limitations of time and be wholly inadequate to the occasion. Our guest represents the tenth generation of the Emerson family in America; his earliest direct male ancestor came to Ipswich, Massachusetts from Bishops-Stortford in England in 1638. Thus, there is represented over 300 years of Yankee background. Dr. Emerson had the great advantage of a good environmental education, being the son of a physician and reared in the atmosphere of medical practice. The product of this background is about to receive a plaque from The New York Academy of Medicine honoring him for distinguished service to the Academy.

Dr. Emerson was born in the City of New York on October 19, 1874. He received an A.B. from Harvard in 1896 and an A.M. from Columbia in 1899, with a concurrent degree of M.D. from the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University.

It is interesting to recall, as a time indicator, that in September 1899

* Presented at a dinner, arranged by the Committee on Public Health, preceding the Stated Meeting of The New York Academy of Medicine, February 3, 1955.

Admiral Dewey arrived in New York to receive the adulation of its citizens and of the nation, and now commemorated by the Arch at the beginning of Fifth Avenue. After graduation from the College of Physicians and Surgeons young Emerson became an intern in Bellevue Hospital.

In 1902 Dr. Emerson received an appointment at the College of Physicians and Surgeons as Associate in Physiology and Medicine and served as Assistant Visiting Physician at Bellevue from 1906 to 1914. He was at the threshold of the most expansive period in modern medicine and was a student and participant in the remarkable changes that were taking place in physiology, biochemistry, clinical pathology and medicine. In April 1914 he made a definite decision to engage in the special field of preventive medicine and public health. He was endowed with the rare faculty not only of "supposing" and "inclining to think" but "knowing and believing" not from hearsay but by his innate clear vision.

From 1914 we perceive the continuous interplay of the qualities derived from his background with the expansion of his interest in the problems of the general welfare of the community. In rapid succession he became Commissioner of the Department of Health, New York, 1915-1917; Professor of Preventive Medicine at Cornell, Director of Cleveland Health Survey, 1919-1920, and Professor of Public Health at Columbia, 1922-1940. With this sequential progression there was an interruption to serve as Colonel with the Medical Corps of the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I, and to make the official report on the Control of Communicable Disease in the A.E.F. Other opportunities for service were as a Trustee of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and as a member of the Commission of Expert Statisticians of the Health Section of the League of Nations.

Our guest has contributed over 200 papers of merit on most diverse studies. One can trace the emergence of his basic and fundamental mind with each successive year. Among his early papers is one on the decapsulation of the kidney and its relationship to chronic nephritis. This was followed very shortly by an excursion into statistical medicine—"The Reliability of Certain Classes of Death Certificates," and then the engaging but difficult task of "A Formulated System of Disease Nomenclature," or "A Survey of Communicable Diseases," or "Diabetes Mellitus and Mortality Statistics."

Perhaps the most substantial evidence of his contribution to human welfare was the appearance of the seventh edition of "The American Public Health Association's Report on the Control of Communicable Disease" (1950). This work, initiated in 1916 and continued personally for thirty-five years by Dr. Emerson as Chairman of the Committee of the American Public Health Association, is a most significant social document and may well stand as his greatest contribution.

Our guest this evening expresses his credo in three significant categories—the continuing and beneficial effect of effective intelligence; the implanting of the superior relation of restraint; and the courage to face problems as they present themselves. His services in the field of public health are widely known and recognized. From the Republic of France, he received the Médaille des Epidémies and Chevalier Legion d'Honneur. From the United States Government he received the Distinguished Service Medal and was the recipient of the Sedgewick Memorial Medal. He received the Lasker award for his contributions to Public Health and Preventive Medicine, and in 1954, the honorary degree of Doctor of Science from Columbia University.

Dr. Emerson's personal characteristics are familiar to you. He has much of the philosophy of his grandfather's brother,—Ralph Waldo Emerson; much of the zeal of Augustine, much of the statistical precision of William Farr. A writer of prose of distinction, a forceful, pleasant, agreeable person, he can still react to the words of Aeschylus "that the years are no barrier to the acquisition of knowledge" and in spite of his chronological years he is still eager, vibrant and inquisitive. "The soul of a crusader in the noblest tradition."

I can view perhaps more objectively his career than those who are identified with his own specialty and it may rightfully be claimed that there is no field of medical activity that has not been touched by the labors of our guest and his contributions to our social order.

The soundness and range of his learning, his ample and capacious intellect, the courage of his judgment and the simple eloquence of his diction—all lend dignity to the ethical concept of his life.

In closing, one may paraphrase Henley,—Haven Emerson has fulfilled himself and we all may share in the rich quiet of the afterglow that is to come.